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STEVENSON'S CONCEPTION OF THE FABLE

"The Fabulist's a pedant, whose profession
Is, with the plainest most precise expression,
To preach in all ways, unto all mankind,
'Be wise and good!' Well for him, if we find
Those speaking contrasts in his text, which spare
The preacher's pains, and of themselves declare
The preacher's purpose! Well, if, on his way,
One with its load, the other with its lay,
Emmet and grasshopper do chance to pass,
Or royal lion and ridiculous ass,
Or crafty fox and over-credulous crow!
For contrasts, such as these, have but to show
Their faces to us; and, as soon as seen,
All's understood.

But ah! not always doth kind Chance provide
Such fortunate occurrences for him
Who pries not only into corners dim
For secret treasures, but in field or street
Questions whatever he may chance to meet;
And often for an answer waits in vain,
Or gets one he is puzzled to explain."¹

—So Lord Lytton suggested the difference between the work of the classical fabulist and his own two volumes of "Fables in Song," which, according to Robert Louis Stevenson, were most successful when they differed most widely from the older model. The question at once arises, what does Lord Lytton's modification of the type indicate as to its nature? Is the fable capable of some such variation as he conceived essential, or must it, under such treatment, break down and give place to some other form? The "Fables in Song" themselves give a doubtful answer; their quality is not such as to justify their combination of the old and the new—it is distinctly mediocre. But Stevenson's criticism of the "Fables in Song,"² and his own modification of the form in accordance with the principles of his criticism, give some interesting evidence as to its possibilities.

¹ From *Fortune and her Followers*, "Fables in Song." Edward Robert Lytton Bulwer-Lytton. 1874.

² "Lord Lytton's 'Fables in Song.'" Robert Louis Stevenson. 1874. (In "Lay Morals and other Papers." Scribner's. 1915.)

In explaining Lytton's departure from the norm Stevenson made suggestive even though inexpert use of the historical method. He defined the typical fable, and then tried to show, in terms of general human progress, how the type was bound to undergo important modifications, even while maintaining its essential qualities. "In the most typical form," he writes, "some moral precept is set forth by means of a conception purely fantastic, and usually somewhat trivial into the bargain; there is something playful about it, that will not support a very exacting criticism, and the lesson must be apprehended by the fancy at half a hint." This form "depended for much of its piquancy on the very fact that it was fantastic." In further accounting for its playfulness he suggests that "there lay, perhaps, at the bottom of this primitive sort of fable, a humanity, a tenderness of rough truths; so that at the end of some story, in which vice or folly had met with its destined punishment, the fabulist might be able to assure his auditors, as we have often to assure tearful children on the like occasions, that they may dry their eyes, for none of it is true." But as time goes on, he says, we should expect the fable to be more loosely, or largely, conceived. The pleasantry of humorous inappropriateness will become less common as the theory of evolution makes us suspect some serious analogy between animals and men. And even the benefit of being able to assure a too sympathetic audience that it was all a fiction "becomes lost with more sophisticated hearers and authors." "A man is no longer the dupe of his own artifice, and cannot deal playfully with truths that are a matter of bitter concern to him in his life. And hence, in the progressive centralization of modern thought, we should expect the old form of fable to fall gradually into desuetude, and be gradually succeeded by another, which is a fable in all points except that it is not altogether fabulous."

This new form, this non-fabulous fable, "still presents the essential character of brevity"; there is still a moral idea, "underlying and animating the brief action"; and the object still is "to bring this home to the reader through the intellect rather than through the feelings; so that, without being very deeply moved or interested by the characters of the piece, we should recognize vividly the hinges on which the little plot

revolves." "But," he continues, "the fabulist now seeks analogies where before he merely sought humorous situations. There will now be a logical nexus between the moral expressed and the machinery employed to express it. The machinery, in fact, as this change is developed, becomes less and less fabulous. We find ourselves in presence of quite a serious, if quite a miniature, division of creative literature." Moreover, "the moral tends to become more indeterminate and large. It ceases to be possible to append it, in a tag, to the bottom of the piece, as one might write the name below a caricature; and the fable begins to take rank with all other forms of creative literature, as something too ambitious, in spite of its miniature dimensions, to be resumed in any succinct formula without the loss of all that is deepest and most suggestive in it."

These attempts to generalize about the history of the fable possibly indicate why Stevenson himself, as recently noted by one of his critics,³ called his review of the "Fables in Song" "some of the deedest rubbish that an intelligent editor ever shot into his wastepaper basket." From Stevenson's letters on the subject we know that he felt hurried in writing the review; doubtless he realized that the history and analysis of the fable type was a bigger task than he was making it. There is much in Stevenson's historical generalizations that might well be challenged. Nevertheless, his remarks serve as a fairly adequate comparison of the typical fable and Lord Lytton's modification thereof. The essentials of the type that he found persisting were its brevity, the moral, and the relatively unsympathetic—intellectual rather than emotional—manner of presenting the moral. The modifications consisted in the indeterminateness of the moral, and the organic relation between story and moral replacing the half humorous parallelism of the typical form.

No one can quarrel with Stevenson for valuing Lord Lytton's departure from the accepted model more highly than his occasional conformity. The typical fable is characterized by a rational and a moral simplicity that Stevenson's day, and certainly Stevenson himself, could hardly be expected to appreciate. Granted any intellectual power or imaginative

³ "A Book of R. L. S." George E. Brown.

insight whatever, and the fabulist of the 1870's was bound to be one who often for his answer looked "in vain," or got one he was "puzzled to explain." It is to Lytton's credit that, being a fabulist at all, he was such an one as this. Though it is true that his fables not infrequently point out rather commonplace morals, yet on the whole they leave the reader with a sense of knowledge rather than of precept, and of knowledge that is not altogether easy to translate into precept. The universe is not made out to be so morally simple or rationally satisfying as in the typical form; hence it is to Stevenson and his contemporaries a more stimulating universe.

And Stevenson certainly did well to commend the truly imaginative way in which the characters of the stories were treated, the fact that they were not arbitrarily and half playfully taken to illustrate some truth belonging to a different sphere, but were significant in themselves. The truths of Lord Lytton's nature fables are on the whole truths very applicable to the world of men, and the application is often obvious; but they are also true of the world nature. While the typical fable is true to nature in as far as the general characteristics of the actors are concerned, the development of situation and action has only human significance. The animals, as Lord Lytton suggests, are paired in such a way as to serve the preacher's purpose most delightfully, with their ready-made "speaking contrasts," but they would scarcely please the naturalist. They are grouped so as to teach certain lessons about jealousy or flattery, for example, that find their meaning largely in the field of human relationships. Lytton, however, places his characters in fairly natural environments. Moreover, the characters themselves are not the conventional types of the ordinary fable. The laws that he is illustrating are laws so general that they can be illustrated by anything and everything, not simply cunning foxes and evil wolves; they are many of them metaphysical rather than moral—laws of attraction and repulsion, self-expression, or the transformation of energy. Thanks to the fact that his characters need not be stock types, and on the whole are not, one feels in reading the fables that he is to some extent discovering new truths about the persons of the tales, not simply learning that certain moral axioms can be illustrated by actors whose true natures

are already perfectly known. His thistles and rain-pools and stars and poets are of some interest in themselves.

But the question remains, are these attempts at a truly imaginative treatment of nature fables? Stevenson seems to assume that they manifest several essentials of the type, but one might well challenge his assumptions about their brevity and the intellectual manner of presentation. Many of the fables are elaborated to the point of losing all effect of brevity, and there is frequently a superfluity of sentiment in their style. It would almost seem as though Lord Lytton were trying to do the impossible; as though poets nowadays must choose between imaginative, creative literature and the fable form. It would seem that in as far as the fable becomes a miniature division of creative literature, just in so far it ceases to be a fable. But it is here that Stevenson's own attempts to use the fable form become of interest.

In a number of his own fables Stevenson succeeded in doing the very thing that Lord Lytton just failed of doing; he exemplified the new form that he defined in the criticism of the "Fables in Song," and proved that an imaginative fable was a possibility, even to his day and generation.

In his edition of the "Fables"⁴ published after Stevenson's death Sidney Colvin distinguishes between several kinds of tales that Stevenson himself called fables. Stevenson's conception included, he says, his semi-supernatural stories such as "Will of the Mill" and "Markheim," the "fables more strictly so called," "cast in the conventional brief and familiar form," and others included in the volume of fables but "running to greater length, and conceived in a more mystic and legendary vein." The fables that best vindicate Stevenson's theory are the "fables more strictly so called," that is, those contained in Colvin's collection exclusive of "The House of Eld," "Something in It," "The Touchstone," "The Poor Thing," and "The Song of the Morrow."

Reading these fables no one can have the least doubt that they are—fables. And analysis shows that they have all the qualities that Stevenson considered essential to the type: they are brief, they present a moral, and they present it in such

⁴ "Fables." Scribner's. 1896.

a way that "without being very deeply moved or interested by the characters of the piece," we yet "recognize vividly the hinges on which the little plot revolves." At the same time no one can question their right to be called creative literature; they are without a doubt imaginatively suggestive.

In accounting for Stevenson's success there are several factors to be considered. First as to the moral: Stevenson's fable has a moral, though the whole can by no means be "summed up in any succinct formula," on account of the very nature of the truth presented. An early reviewer⁵ noted that a number of the fables have for their moral "a sort of inversion of the copy book rule." And this is exactly what we find in the majority of the group being considered. The fables can be put in one of two classes: they either logically reduce to an absurdity some commonly accepted truth or morality, or else parody or caricature some such morality.

A typical example of the first class is "The Sinking Ship." In this the truly noble captain, who insists that the precarious condition of the ship offers no reason for going about half shaved, is finally driven to admit, by means of pure logic, that there is no difference at all between shaving in a sinking ship or smoking in a powder magazine, "or doing anything at all in any conceivable circumstances."

Typical of the second class is "The Yellow Paint," in which the claims of certain clergy are satirized. The yellow paint, which is supposed to set men free from "the dangers of life, and the bondage of sin, and the fear of death forever," proves to do nothing of the sort. After each failure the physician offers explanations and interpretations which, while not very consoling to the victim, are only too suggestive of some types of religious parlance.

There is surely a real difference between Stevenson's morals and those of the typical fabulist. Another of the early reviewers,⁶ to whom we have to resort for much significant criticism of the fables, wrote that some of them "are almost more remarkable than any of his more elaborate compositions. They are essentially modern in their structure, and go to the

⁵ "Academy" 1898.

⁶ "Spectator" Sept. 7, 1895.

very root of the paradox that all the deep modern thinkers find in human life, though they do not pretend to find any solution of that paradox, but leave it where they found it." Of course the ordinary moral fable always owes its point to something paradoxical. If appearances were not deceiving there would be no need of morals; if swiftness were not apparently more effective than perseverance there would be no need of the hare and the tortoise to prove the opposite. But the ordinary fable does not leave the paradox where it finds it; it solves the problem by discounting one side, the side of superficial appearances, and throws all the weight on the side of the moral that contradicts these appearances. The interesting thing about Stevenson's fables is that they prove morals, not appearances, to be deceptive, and ask us to invert them, as it were. Since these inversions of the copybook rules are truths that have not yet "become definitely moral," to use one of Stevenson's own phrases, his method is negative—and suggestive. He discounts the accepted moral in such a way as to leave us with a sense that the two sides are fairly evenly balanced, though our sympathies are enlisted on the side of the vaguely suggested inversion.

As for the "machinery" of his fables, it is not "altogether fabulous"; that is, form and content are organically related. The fables do not owe their piquancy to the humorousness of analogies between men and beasts. The characters themselves are scarcely fabulous. Only in "The Tadpole and the Frog" are the actors animals. In one fable a distinguished stranger from another planet appears, in one the devil, and in one the Great White Justice of the Peace; in "The Persons of the Tale" the actors are the characters of "Treasure Island" come to life, but in all the rest they are ordinary human beings—friends, reformers, physicians, sick men, firemen, captains, and such. And the activities of these characters, while sometimes a bit preposterous, are not on the whole supernatural. If we accept the theory that animals are frequently used as the characters of fables because we are supposed not to sympathize with them as much as we should with real human beings,⁷ it would seem that Stevenson's choice was not legitimate. And

⁷ Lessing's theory. See Francis Storr on Fables. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, eleventh edition.

yet as a matter of fact we read about his ship that blows up with a glorious detonation without being much moved by the presence on board of real human beings instead of the traditional foxes and wolves. Stevenson makes this possible by following the method of the typical fabulist in not individualizing his characters any more than is absolutely essential for the half serious, half humorous point of his tale, and by giving no details of environment that are not equally essential. His characters are natural, and they are not stock types; but they are not real.

For example, "The Sick Man and the Fireman" begins quite abruptly, "There was once a sick man in a burning house to whom there entered a fireman." In the course of the tale we learn that the fireman "was a civil fellow," "a man of some philosophy," with "nothing hasty about him," and that he was "eminently just;" but that is all. About the sick man we are told nothing directly, but from his remarks we gather that the fireman was perhaps right in considering him something of a fool. Given actors as little individualized as these, actors of whose past history, of whose friends and relatives, we know nothing, we waste little sympathy or even blame when we read that the fireman "heaved up his fireman's axe . . . and clove" the sick man to the bed.

Again, all that we know of the Four Reformers is that they met "under a bramble bush," a place sufficiently innocuous to keep us from being very deeply concerned over their final decision that everything must be abolished, including mankind.

The world of these fables is not a supernatural world, and it is not peopled with supernatural beings, and yet we do not approach it with any sense of reality. There is no danger of our entering into the feelings of the characters any more than is necessary for the intellectual development of the plot. We are quite heart-free to smile at the logical absurdities and the patness of the outcome.

As is already evident, Stevenson's success in making the fable what he would call a miniature form of creative literature and yet keeping it a fable, was due in no small measure to his technique. The paradoxes that he so thoroughly enjoyed,

and that he developed almost lyrically in his intimate essays,⁸ he presents here with a poignancy equally perfect in its way. In pointing the fables various devices serve as substitutes for the neatly drawn moral of the typical form. The *reductio ad absurdum* fables could scarcely fail to be pointed; their climactic structure is practically determined for them by the logic of the case. The parodies might conceivably drag; but they do not. Parallelism, balance, climax, inimitable closing sentences, serve as effective devices for giving the necessary piquancy to both types.—“‘We must abolish property,’ said one. ‘We must abolish marriage,’ said the second. ‘We must abolish God,’ said the third.” And for conclusive endings—“‘They are the people of the greatest nation in the world,’ said the philosopher. ‘Are they indeed?’ said the stranger. ‘They scarcely look so.’”—Or simply “‘There,’ said the innkeeper.”—after making his noose and hanging the devil.

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In writing on fables in the “Encyclopaedia Britannica”⁹ Francis Storr says that though the day of the typical fable is past there are yet indications that this form of literature is capable of “new and unexpected developments.” These developments, it would seem, might well be traced along any one of several lines, according to what we consider the *sine qua non* of the fable. When Storr mentions the Jungle Books as a modern form of the fable it is evident that he has in mind something quite different from Stevenson’s conception. In tracing the evolution—or devolution—of literary types it is always of course a question, what particular descendants shall bear the patronym. And in this study I do not wish to suggest that Stevenson’s fables have better claim to the title than others that might be mentioned. However, his theory of the fable as worked out in his criticism of Lord Lytton’s “Fables in Song” and his own success in the group of fables that best exemplify this theory, serve as valid evidence of one of the modern possibilities of the type.

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⁸ Cf. the author’s paper “Paradox and Antithesis in Stevenson’s Essays.” JOURNAL OF ENGLISH AND GERMANIC PHILOLOGY. October 1920.

⁹ Eleventh edition.